

Communicating with Family and Friends about Your Child's Gender

If you are seeing family or friends that do not know about your child's gender, it is a good idea to prepare them ahead of time in order to make sure your child's interactions with them will be positive. A good way to do this is to call or write people prior to their visit so they have some time to get used to the idea and so you can clearly establish your expectations for how they interact with your child. Remember, people will follow your lead on how to respond to your child's gender.

Here are some key concepts you may want to cover in your communications:

- Tell the story of your child's journey and the impact affirming their gender has had on their life. What have you noticed (changes in mood, attitude, at school, socially, etc.)?
- Clearly state your full support for your child and your expectation that your child be treated with respect. Be clear you will not tolerate unkind or disrespectful comments or questions about your child.
- Be specific about what you are asking your family/friends to do (use new name and pronoun, etc.).
- Explain the impact of parental acceptance on the health and well-being of gender-expansive youth and why it is so important to support your child.
 - Some sobering statistics: 41% of transgender and other gender non-conforming adults have attempted suicide; attempts were highest among those who are younger (18 to 24 was 45%). (Williams Institute and the American Foundation of Suicide Prevention, 2014)
 - These youth are also at great risk for other self-harming behaviors such as cutting and eating disorders.
 - Parents make a **tremendous** difference. Consider this: 35% of teens who felt they had strongly supportive parents considered suicide in the past year, only 4% did make an attempt; in contrast, 60% of teens who felt they did not have strongly supportive parents considered suicide in the past year and nearly all of them attempted suicide. Teens who perceived that their parents strongly support them in regards to their gender were 93% less likely to attempt suicide than teens who did not perceive that they had strong parent support. (Transpulse Study, 2012)
 - Teens with strongly supportive parents were also significantly less likely to suffer from depression. (Transpulse Study, 2012)
 - Teens with strongly supportive parents significantly more likely to be satisfied with their lives, have positive mental health, and have high self-esteem. (Transpulse Study, 2012)
- Let them know they are welcome to discuss your child's gender with you in private, but they should not talk about it in front of your child (unless your child is older and has

specifically said they want to answer questions about their gender). If you have limits about how much advice or input you are open to, be sure to set them clearly.

- Be specific about whether you would like this information to be kept confidential or not. If not confidential, what aspects are they allowed to share? Are there certain ways you want them to speak about the topic?
- Provide some resources for them to learn more about gender and youth. Here are some helpful places to start:
 - *The Transgender Child: A Handbook for Families and Professionals* by Stephanie Brill and Rachel Pepper
 - *The Transgender Teen: A Handbook for Parents and Professionals Supporting Transgender and Non-Binary Teens* by Stephanie Brill and Lisa Kenney
 - *The Gender Creative Child: Pathways for Nurturing and Supporting Children Who Live Outside Gender Boxes* by Diane Ehrensaft, PhD
 - *Gender Born, Gender Made: Raising Healthy Gender-Nonconforming Children* by Diane Ehrensaft, PhD
 - www.genderspectrum.org
- Remind them your child is more than just their gender and they should see and relate to your whole child. If they are nervous, tell them what your child's current interests are so they will have some safe topics to discuss.

Sample Letters to Family and Friends

The following sample letters are examples that have been paraphrased from family letters shared with Gender Spectrum. They are not intended to serve as templates, but instead to give a sense of some language that other families have used to address various issues. You may choose to take some ideas from these letters or not, depending upon whether they speak to your family's situation.

Sample Letter 1

Dear Family and Friends,

We have had some recent changes in our life that we would like to share with you. Our child, _____, who, from an early age has shown signs of being gender-nonconforming, has been verbalizing to us for over a year such statements as "I am a girl inside and out," "I don't want to be a girl, I am a girl," "Please don't call me _____ anymore, call me _____ because that is a girl's name," "I am your sister, not your brother," and "I am a big girl, not a big boy." Additionally, _____ insists on wearing only girls' underwear, dreams of fingernail polish and lipstick, and only wants to play with Tinkerbell, dolls, and fairies. These gender comments continued daily, and increased in both frequency and intensity, to the point where we sought out professional therapy, consultation, and an evaluation with a prominent psychiatrist, licensed clinical social worker, and one of the leading national gender experts, _____, a developmental and clinical psychologist.

Through much study, exploration, and consultation with these mental health professionals on gender non-conforming children and extensive reading on recent gender research, we have determined that _____ is a transgender child, meaning although _____ was born with anatomy that made us assume she was a boy, she knows herself to be a girl.

We are sure that this may be confusing for some of you. It certainly was for us at the beginning and caused us many tears and sleepless nights, but what we have learned is that most children realize their "true gender" between 3 to 5 years of age, as has been the case with many families we have met who have had similar journeys with their children. We have also learned that our child's transgender identity is not a result of our parenting style, family structure, or environmental factors and that there is nothing anyone can do to change a child's gender identity. This is not just a phase for _____ or something that she will outgrow.

We are now allowing _____ to live full time as a girl named _____, a name she selected. We request that you welcome _____ fully as part of our family. Please only refer to her by a female pronoun and by her name _____. Despite any personal feelings or religious ideation you may have about our decision, we expect that you will be fully respectful of _____.

Our goals for _____ are the same as when we brought her home at 3 weeks old: to be happy, feel good about herself, to find what she is good at, and to know that she is loved unconditionally. These goals have not changed.

We are aware of the uphill journey ahead for our daughter and our entire family but the alternative of denying who she is, puts her at a high risk of depression, anxiety, suicide,

sexual acting out, and substance abuse, which are not options for us. ____ has such a positive, loving, and caring spirit and since she has been allowed to be who she was born to be, we have seen a much happier child. Our love and support for ____ is complete. We hope yours will be too since family and friends are so important to us and it will be to ____ as she goes through this transition. She needs to know, without a shadow of a doubt, that she is loved as ____, just as she was as ____.

If you would like to learn more about gender non-conforming or transgender children some recommended books are “The Transgendered Child” by Stephanie Brill and Rachel Pepper and “Gender Born, Gender Made – Raising Healthy Gender-Nonconforming Children” by Dr. Diane Ehrensaft, or national gender educational websites such as www.genderspectrum.org.

Sample Letter 2

Hi everyone,

We have some changes we want to share with our friends and family. The biggest news is that ____ has decided to start living as a boy and has changed his name to _____. The pronouns, he, him, and his now apply. How did this come about? Many of you who have watched ____ grow up may have noticed him change from a “girly-girl” in preschool to an “uber tomboy”. Since the beginning of third grade ____ has been wearing only “boy’s” clothes and haircuts. He often would say he wanted to be a boy, and being good feminists, we’d say “Girls can do anything that boys can!” but that wasn’t what he was talking about. We started letting ____ be a boy on vacations and in situations where we didn’t know anyone. He was at his happiest when he was taken for a boy. By the beginning of fourth grade, we decided this wasn’t a phase and that it was time for him to meet with a feelings doctor who knew a lot about gender nonconforming kids.

The turning point came this past March. When ____ realized that he would be going to a new school where he wouldn’t know anyone, he revealed his deepest wish: to start middle school as boy. While I knew this choice was a possibility, I was still shocked. And, suddenly there were lots of decisions to be made quickly. One was about middle school: in a few weeks, ____ will be starting a private school where there are several other transgender kids.

Signs of approaching puberty led us to a pediatric endocrinologist who has started ____ on Lupron Depot. This shot, given monthly, is commonly called a “puberty blocker” and has been used since the ‘70s to halt precocious puberty in really young children. For ____ this means his body will stay in its child stage until he goes off the medication. He’ll continue to grow, but while he’s on the drug, he won’t have a growth spurt or “develop.” ____ is not taking male hormones; Lupron is a drug that will buy him many years while we try to figure out the next steps. If he decides he is a girl, he can go off the drug, and puberty will pick up where it left off.

_____ is fine, confident, and calm. He says he has a boy’s soul in a girl’s body. On the other hand, I’m living with a lot of uncertainty. _____ is just 11, and this seems way too young to be making decisions that will affect him forever. I love him so much, and it’s

really hard to know if I'm making the right choices. I've done a lot of reading, met with therapists, friends and family, and have gone to support groups.

I'm learning a lot and am facing my own internal prejudices. What is certain is that _____ is already so much happier being able to live as a boy. Spending a few years at an awesome and accepting middle school and taking medication where the effects are completely reversible seem like reasonable choices for now.

I decided that I needed to send a mass mailing just to catch everyone up. I have _____'s permission to share this information with you, but it is private and should not to be passed on to people who never knew _____. He also does not want his former or future school friends to know, so please don't share this information with his school friends or their families. If you have any questions or concerns, you're welcome to email or call me.

I'm hoping you will talk to your partners and kids, and that you will be allies we can count on during this journey. And, the next time we run into you, please be sure to say hi to _____!

Sample Letter 3

Dear loved ones,

We are writing this letter in advocacy for our family. We have thought/struggled long and hard as to how to broach the subject of our family, but feel that an honest, heartfelt letter is best.

As some of you know, at the age of two, _____ began to verbalize conflict in the way he identified. At first it was subtle gestures. There was a gravitation or preference for stereotypical female toys and clothes. As _____ grew, so did the feelings of "being born in the wrong body". Imagine your little boy lying in bed at night praying to God to please let him wake up the next day a girl and to correct the mistake HE had made at birth. With every coin thrown into a wishing pond _____ would "Wish to be a girl". As a parent, it has been so painful to watch your child cry about "not being able to be themselves".

We decided it was time to seek professional help. We consulted our pediatrician, therapists, psychiatrists and specialists in the field of Gender Identity. I was often accused of "encouraging" _____'s feminine behavior, but I couldn't have stopped it if I tried. I always believed that each child is born with a spirit, a reason to be. It was my greatest responsibility as a parent to nurture that spirit and help him become who he was meant to be, not who I/society wanted him to be.

Regardless of my efforts with the schools, support groups and community, people can be mean, even cruel and hurtful to a child. In October, _____ was suicidal. _____ threatened, on a regular basis, to end his life. I spent my days crying, heartbroken that my child was so miserable and sad that he would choose death over life. After an assessment with the pediatric psychiatric specialist, _____ was hospitalized. We discovered that _____ was so overly anguished about the huge rejection he experienced at school, home, the community etc. that he would rather die than to not be able live as "_____."

At that point, we made the commitment to support our child fully. To allow her to express her true identity and to be loved and accepted unconditionally. We committed to being the best parents by showing her we love her, regardless. We have learned from our

specialists and doctors that ____ has non-conforming gender identity; she is transgender. The good news was there was an explanation. The hard news was that the only “options” for such a condition was either to allow an individual to express as their identified gender, or to deny that and allow the child to suffer.

So, here we are. ____ is expressing herself in her identified gender. ____ is a girl with a penis. We have begun using female pronouns. And my goodness what a change. We have watched our child’s spirit come to life. It was like witnessing the metamorphosis a caterpillar makes to become a beautiful butterfly. As her outward appearance started to resemble who she felt like inside, her academics and social skills have improved as well.

We understand that this will take you some time getting used to, and we will be happy to talk over any questions or thoughts you may have about any of this, but not in front of _____. Yes, we are facing a difficult situation, but the alternative would be worse. In our many hours and hours of research, meetings with professionals and consulting families who face similar challenges, we know we are doing the best for _____.

So, what we are asking from you is compassion and understanding of something you may never understand. We are available to provide you with information and resources about being transgender. I have purchased books that you can borrow for parents and young children. Our beautiful child does not embarrass us and we hope you can feel the same way. We ask that you support _____; to accept her wholeheartedly as she is. We will not ask _____ to become someone she is not, we will not force her to wear “boys” clothing any more. She is free to be herself.

I ask that if you feel that you cannot accept _____ as herself, to please respect our desires to keep her healthy and safe. Although you may not agree with us or how we are raising our child, please respect our decisions as parents. We must stand behind our child 100%. If that means not taking part in certain events, we understand, but we will not force _____ to feel unaccepted.

Our child has taught me more than I learned in my entire life before she was born. She has taught me the true meaning of tolerance, perseverance and patience. She has taught me to take nothing for granted and not to be scared of the “What ifs” in life. These are life’s challenges and adventures which, when celebrated rather than feared, make our life experience whole.

Sample Letter 4

Dear Family and Friends,

We’re writing to share with you some important news about ____ before we see you next month. ____ recently let us know that they identify as non-binary in their gender identity and asked us to use the pronouns “they/them/their”. We love and support _____ 100% and are so thankful that they trusted us enough to share this part of their identity with us.

We understand that this may be confusing for some of you, as it was for us at first. Most of us have been taught that there are only two genders, which is called the gender binary. In fact, there are now, as there have always been, people of many different genders besides girl/woman and boy/man, even though we are just starting to talk about this



openly in our society. Non-binary means someone identifies outside of the gender binary, so they can feel like they are both male and female, neither of these, or a variety of other genders. For ____, their definition of non-binary is feeling that they are both male and female.

It is essential that we support ____ on their journey, as transgender and non-binary youth are so vulnerable without strong parent support. The suicide, self-harm, and poor mental well-being statistics are terrifying and we will do everything in our power to support _____. Research is clear that family support makes a huge difference in the mental health and well-being of transgender and non-binary teens, so we are asking for your love and support both for _____ and for us.

We ask that you use they/them/their pronouns when you see _____. This takes practice, and we still make mistakes, though it is becoming easier the more we use the pronouns. As long as you sincerely make an effort, _____ will see that and be patient with you, as they have been with us. Please don't bring up the argument that it is not grammatically correct to use "they" in the singular. There are plenty of examples of the singular "they" in our language (example: Someone left their sweater here), and even if there weren't, is grammar really more important than recognizing a loved one for who they are? We need our friends and family to treat our child with respect, as you always have in the past.

_____ has given us permission to share this information with you and has said they are open to answering questions; gender is one of their favorite topics these days! If you do ask them questions, please only do so if they are from an open-hearted and respectful place. If you cannot do that, bring your questions to us, but not to _____.

The bottom line is this is still the same child we love, and we know that you love too. We're attaching some resources about gender identity and non-binary genders which we hope will be helpful. We can't wait to see you all soon!